

Choice Literature.

A LITERARY VENTURE.

BY MABEL FLEMING.

Mrs. Lovell always maintained that the terrible business of her novel, and the dire pains and penalties that resulted from it, were entirely due to the Bishop of Crowborough, and to the bishop alone. She admitted she was encouraged by Anthony Trollope, and other literary swells, who all wrote articles proving convincingly that literature was the easiest and most lucrative trade in the world if you only hit the right vein, but it was the bishop who first started her on that untoward literary venture. Every time she told the story (and during the subsequent thirty years of her life she certainly told it a hundred times) she deepened the turpitude of the bishop and the bloodthirsty character of his conduct, until her husband, the Rev. Aubrey Lovell, a hilarious country rector with a tremendous voice, would shout out in his genial way, "Now, Nellie, my love, the bishop had really very little to do with it, and behaved very nicely, I think; it was all your ridiculous vanity and greed."

It is necessary to clear the ground by telling you something of the bishop and Mrs. Lovell. The Bishop of Crowborough was the oldest prelate on the bench. He was appointed to the see in the days when a scholarly edition of Juvenal or Euripides was the most direct road to a mitre.

His appointment dated so far back in the past that no one living exactly knew what particular scholarship obtained for Dr. Octavius Mackereth the see of Crowborough. He had held it for forty-five years, and for the greater portion of that period the bishop had been engaged on a gigantic book, a profound but little read history of the "Monks of the Thebaid;" a volume appearing at intervals of about six years.

As no one ever bought the book, far less read it, the publication cost the learned author a small fortune. The bishop was not only a celibate but a confirmed woman hater, or perhaps one might say a woman-ignorant; he seemed to realize the sex with an effort. What one may call the woman *motif* occurred regularly once in the life of each of his Thebaid monks, but they were all mere dream women, emissaries of Satan sent in vision to tempt that particular monk back to the pomps and vanities of the world. This, the bishop perceived was evidently the chief function of woman. Meanwhile, the bishop being permanently engaged in the Libyan Desert, the diocese fell into a lamentable state of decay, dissent flourished and waxed fat, yea, even under the shadow of the cathedral itself. Twice a year the bishop emerged from historical research and gave a reception at the palace, but of course, as he had no wife, no ladies came. The bishop never had the least idea how many of his clergy would come, and made random preparations of a helpless kind, the fare provided being of the meanest description. Some stringy sandwiches, some weak negus and parboiled tea, formed the episcopal menu. The High Church clergy struggled fiercely for the negus, and the Low Church lapped up the weak tea. Nobody under the rank of a prebend had the least chance of securing a spoon to himself. The bishop was practically a stranger to four fifths of his clergy. At the beginning of these lamentable receptions he tried to identify his guests and say something appropriate to each, but he soon gave that task up, and adopted a stereotyped kindly smile to accompany each handshake. This was a far safer plan, as the poor bishop had a dreadful habit of cheerfully inquiring after newly buried wives; and to this day they tell the story of his asking old Canon Jenkins after his wife when all the diocese was ringing with the news of her elopement with his curate.

So much for the bishop, now for Mrs. Lovell. She was a woman of about forty; the ordinary healthy type of English matron, quite ignorant of art and literature, but entirely satisfied with herself, her children and husband. She was ambitious in a kindly way, and tried to push her husband up in the world; but this pushing business was a herculean task, for her excellent husband was without any upward tendencies, being of the steady, slow, easy-going order, that quietly holds on and always ends in being an archdeacon. As regards herself, Mrs. Lovell used to say,—

"I don't pretend to be clever or learned, but I really do consider I write a very good letter."

She said this so often, and with such an air of conviction, that all her friends grew to think so too. Now there was a grain of truth in this claim. She wrote a thoroughly reckless, rattling, feminine letter; she could not have described a sunset or a landscape to save her life, but she gave her a bit of village gossip, and she would dress and touch it up till it became a very lifelike and amusing sketch; then she touched off all her friends' peculiarities with such a good-natured and lively pen that every one said when they heard a letter of hers read aloud, "What a very amusing person that Mrs. Lovell must be!"

It happened just about now that, by an odd chance, the bishop's brother, who was an old literary bachelor living in the Albany, went on a visit of three days to the palace at Crowborough. The brothers became dimly conscious of each other's existence about once in five years, then the bishop asked the Albany bachelor to visit Crowborough, and the latter went, always limiting his stay to exactly three days; he used to say at the Athenæum; "The first day is chastened affection, the second indifference and weariness, the third hatred and despair; if I stayed a fourth I should murder the bishop or die myself."

During his visit he pumped into the bishop all the gossip of the clubs and all the literary news, though of course neither the one nor the other mixed at all well with the monks of the Thebaid, but the Albany brother said it was his duty to post the bishop up to date. It was just at this time that the "Life of George Eliot" appeared.

The bishop had the very vaguest of notions as to George Eliot and her achievements, but he knew that she was a woman, though it puzzled him beyond measure why a woman should assume a man's name.

That a woman should write books was one astonishing fact, that any one should read them was another; and the third and most astonishing fact of all was that any publisher should pay her 7,000*l.*, as his brother assured him had been paid for one of her books. The bishop's experience of publishers and the public was so altogether different.

The week after the Albany brother left, the bishop, by the most unusual combination of circumstances, had to go to lunch

at Mr. Lovell's to meet another bishop; he loathed the other bishop, who was a stirring, enthusiastic creature of quite modern creation and very modern ideas.

He hated too the very thought of the lunch, but he had to go. How to provide polite conversation for two hours the bishop did not know; so as he drove along he tried to recall a few topics that might be appropriate and interesting, and he endeavoured to recollect and make use of the London gossip his brother had told him, but the sole thing he could recall was a few details about George Eliot, and chiefly that she had had 7,000*l.* for writing one book.

He launched this fact at Mrs. Lovell's head, he dilated upon it, he returned to it again and again. It had astonished the bishop, and it astonished Mrs. Lovell.

When the bishop had left, Mrs. Lovell sat and thought. 7,000*l.* for one book! Why, the bishop only got 4,000*l.* for being a bishop, and it was nearly eighteen times as much as her husband's entire stipend. Mrs. Lovell slept upon the idea, and the next day it had grown and developed. She had a ready pen—what if she wrote a book and got 7,000*l.* for it? She locked the idea in her matronly bosom. Her excellent husband had very old-fashioned notions about women and their vocations. Once she put out a feeler, and challenged his admiration for George Eliot. The rector blinked at her with his big blue eyes.

"What's that, my love?" he said. "Thank Heaven I haven't married one of your scribbling women; there's only one thing worse, and that's the political woman."

"But, my dear Aubrey, the scope and field of woman are enlarging so rapidly."

"Now, my dear," answered the rector, in his hilarious trumpet-toned voice, "don't talk nonsense. My mother was the best of women, and her scope and field were the looking after her family and feeding her poultry."

But when once an idea took root in Mrs. Lovell's mind it was not easily eradicated, and before a week was over she had determined to go in for literature. She had a widowed sister who lived at Hunstanton, and just then came an invitation to spend a month with her. Mrs. Lovell was of too prosaic a turn of mind to look for signs and wonders, but this she accepted as a signal indication from on high that she was to write a book, for a visit to her sister would give her just the quiet time she wanted to get her ideas in order. Her sister was a very pious High Church-woman, entirely given up to philanthropy and Church work, quite content to let Mrs. Lovell go her own way if she would only consent to eat fish on Friday and go to daily service. Mrs. Lovell went to Hunstanton with her brain in a literary ferment. She had to tell her sister of her plans, but all that the widow said was,—

"Well, Ellen, of course you'll see that the tone of your book is religious and healthy."

"Of course I shall see to that. I intend to give up every morning to my novel," continued Mrs. Lovell loftily; "and I must beg of you to see that I am undisturbed."

Mrs. Lovell had secured a little hand-book to young authors, and had mastered the rudimentary details of a suitable paper, writing on one side only, and so on. She had also gone so far as to concoct in her head an outline of a plot—but she thought to herself she would develop it as she went on. The next morning she arranged her dressing table suitable for writing. She opened her desk, took out the lined foolscap paper, and set to work. She said to herself, Mr. hero shall be forty-five, and he shall marry a merry girl of twenty; after marriage a good looking cousin of hers, aged twenty-five shall make love to her, and all but bring about a catastrophe. I shall introduce a designing widow, and two or three subordinate characters to fill up. She plunged at once into Chapter I., but found her ideas did not come as quickly as she hoped; it was nothing like as easy as writing a letter. She wrote for an hour, read it all over, and tore it up in despair. Then she tried again, and found herself at a dead pause for something to say. She sat with her head on her hand, racking her brains, but nothing came; then suddenly she dropped her pen and clapped her hands.

"Goodness me!" she cried, "why, Aunt Jane when she gave us drawing lessons used to say, 'Remember, my dears, always draw from nature, go straight to life.' I will; why invent?"

And she did. She wanted a clergyman, and down she pounced on the Bishop of Crowborough. She lifted him bodily into her book. She changed him into a dean, but all his little peculiarities she retained, and gave them a touch or two more. Her pen flew and the pages quickly filled; she read over the description of the dean, and his sayings and doings, and she leant back and laughed at the intense vitality of the thing. Then there was a Mrs. Marchmont in the next parish; she would exactly do for the designing widow. Mrs. Lovell hated her with a consuming hatred. Mrs. Marchmont dressed better than she did, had taken precedence of her on several occasions, and had patronized her openly before all the county, besides, she had many weak points, there were some little questionable matters in her career, scandal had not spared her and certainly Mrs. Lovell would not. Mrs. Marchmont appeared as Lady Holloway, but in all other respects it was a photograph from life.

In her parish there were two excellent old maids, the best of creatures—a little rigid, very quaint in dress, with pretty little affectations, and one with a remote longing for gentlemen's attention. Mrs. Lovell had put them into many a letter, and they both went bodily into her book. Having adopted this method, to her delight and surprise Mrs. Lovell found all went merry as a wedding-bell; after all, once master the method, and it was just as easy to write a novel as to write a letter, and letter-writing had always been her strong point. For some weeks she worked hard at the book, it amused and interested her. She had a little bit of money, something under 100*l.*, put up in consols, and that she intended to devote to the expenses of publishing the book; she called it "A Midsummer Madness."

We may pass over the record of how she got a publisher, and the labours and difficulties she had with proofs and revises. The greatest difficulty of all was to keep the rector in the dark, luckily he was the most unobservant of men. He saw masses of papers coming by post, and set it down in his mind as new music. He observed that his dear Nellie was always writing; but he merely said, "Really, my wife's correspondence is enormous, and I don't wonder at it, for she writes an excellent letter."

Our story reopens some six months later on. Every morning she now expected an advance copy from the publishers. She always came down before breakfast and swooped down on the letters and parcels, and at last this tent.. day of

June brought the long-desired copy. There it was, in the three orthodox volumes, 31*s.* 6*d.* in price, dainty in binding, nice big margins, and good print and paper. She opened the title-page and read, with a bounding heart: "A Midsummer Madness, a Novel. By Mrs. Aubrey Lovell." Then she dipped here and there into her favourite bits—that droll scene where the two old maids encounter the designing widow; really it was humorous and had lots of go in it. Mrs. Lovell laughed aloud. Then the love scene in the old garden, and the despair and madness of the hero; then that pathetic death-bed scene, how true and real it seemed; really, Mrs. Lovell felt, if George Eliot walked into the room now, she would have claimed her as a sister artist.

Meanwhile the rector came noiselessly down-stairs, and entered the room with a bang. "Hullo, my love, anybody's birthday? I see a parcel of new books that look like presents."

"No, dear," she answered, "only the last new novel;" then, blushing furiously, "it looks rather nice."

To his wife's disgust the rector did not exhibit the least curiosity about the last new novel. Ah, she thought, if only he knew, wouldn't he be proud of his wife! but he actually ignored the three pretty blue volumes, and stretched out his hand for his *Guardian*. Then Mrs. Lovell brought matters to a head by saying, "Tell me what you think of the new novel?"

Thereupon the rector drove his wife to the verge of distraction by his exceeding slowness; first of all he couldn't find his glasses, then began a long history as to a letter in the *Guardian* about Queen Anne's Bounty, then wasted another five minutes in polishing up his glasses, ultimately he took up Vol. I., and read in his sonorous voice, "A Midsummer Madness. By Mrs. Aubrey Lovell."

"Goodness gracious me, Nellie! why, it's by a namesake of yours; they'll be putting it down to you."

"It is me," said Mrs. Lovell, being too thrilled to think of grammar.

"You!" replied her husband, dropping the book with a bang, and no number of marks of admiration can convey the surprise he put into his voice; he took off his glasses and rubbed them again. Then she told him how the bishop had sown the seed in her aspiring bosom, and this was the full harvest.

"Well, my love, of course I knew you wrote a good letter, and had a ready pen; but a three volume novel I did think beyond your powers."

She was well content when he took the whole three volumes into his study. She had expected he would have abused her for wasting her time and ordered her back to domestic duties, but he had been so surprised and taken aback that he had half blessed instead of entirely banning her. During the morning Mrs. Lovell was gratified by hearing hearty peals of laughter from her husband's study, and at lunch he said, "Really, my dear, your book is extremely good, but you've made frightfully free with our poor dear bishop. I only hope he won't come across it."

"Oh, I disguised it all well," she answered; "I have only used a few of his peculiarities."

Mrs. Lovell subscribed to Romeike's Agency, and for the next few weeks she had a very jolly time; the press notices were fairly favourable—all the critics thought the plot exceedingly poor, but the bishop, the widow, and the two old maids were greatly praised. Evidently drawn from life, one or two critics said. Then Mrs. Lovell had the joy of presenting her friends with copies of her book, and altogether her poor head was like to be turned with success. Her publishers were very well content too, and said the book was making its mark. Her husband basked in the reflected glow of her fame, and began to be proud of his wife.

(To be continued.)

A PARSON'S PONDERINGS.

What shall I preach about next Sunday! This is a question which, I suppose, occupies most parsons' thoughts early every week. At any rate it does mine just now, as I sit in my study, facing my library. It's no great library, to be sure; a poor parson cannot indulge in that luxury. Luxury, do I call it? Is it not rather a necessity in these days, when the last important work on any debated subject is as necessary to the scholar as the last style of reaper and binder is to the farmer who wants to keep up with the times? Yet a luxury it must remain to the man of slender means. It is rather provoking to have a brother parson, whose purse is longer than one's own, or some learned dignitary remark to one, "Have you read Dr. Tonans' grand new apologetic work, which completely overthrows Professor Molecule's attack on Christianity? If not, you ought to get it; it will only cost you five dollars." Alas! what is a man to do, when he has just been reminded by his wife that Sophie's shoes are worn out, and Johnnie must have a new jacket? Of course Dr. Tonans' book must wait. One can, however, buy Professor Molecule's new work, for that will only cost fifteen or twenty cents, in the cheap popular form. So one can get the latest thought of the day on one side of the question at any rate. Now, what is the reason that I can get Professor Molecule's works so cheap, while Dr. Tonans' is so dear? Is it in accordance with the law of supply and demand? If so, there must be a tremendous demand for Molecule, and a woeful lack of demand for Tonans'. Or is it that "the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light?"

A parson—who has to furnish his people with at least two discourses every week, who is supposed in those two discourses to give their thoughts a direction for good for the ensuing six days, who must (if he is worth anything) be *au courant* with the varied and turbulent thought of the day—ought to have no meagre library.

Of course, a parson of the type which Goldsmith has immortalized, in the parish priest of

Sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain,

with his primitive, patriarchal life, his unworldly calmness, and unsophisticated piety;

And passing rich with forty pounds a year,